



# CARING FOR DAVIDSON COUNTY'S CEMETERIES

Metropolitan Historical Commission



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*Nashville City Cemetery*





## Introduction



Davidson County is full of grave sites: small rural cemeteries, some of which are now located in someone's back yard or in the center of a subdivision, church cemeteries, public and private cemeteries, as well as large cemeteries such as Mount Olivet and the Nashville City Cemetery.



Whether small or vast; whether there is nothing marking the graves except mounds, or there are ornate sculptural monuments, cemeteries and gravesites can be

enjoyable places to visit and fascinating places to study.

They are all sacred places and should be treated with respect. Although monuments are made of stone, they can actually be quite fragile; so when you visit, never touch, lean or sit on a monument.

Whether you are just reading a stone or planning to repair/clean a stone, do your research in advance to make sure that you do not do anything that will cause the monument harm.

Something as simple as a mild soap or a well intentioned

pressure wash can actually cause a great deal of damage that can take several years to be evident.

Although a popular pastime, rubbings of inscriptions should never be done. There are other ways to enjoy and appreciate our historic cemeteries.

For more information about cleaning and repairing monuments see the resources at the end of this document.



*The decay of the carved garland to the left may have been caused by chemicals, detergents or acid rain. The damage at the bottom of the stone to the right was likely caused by weed eaters or mowers.*



## Involving Children

Children can enjoy and learn from cemeteries in a variety of ways. For younger children, here are some ideas:

- Purchase an inexpensive disposable or digital camera and let them take photographs. Polaroid cameras may be fun because of the instant satisfaction, but avoid film with sticky backs so they will not be tempted to stick the photos to the monuments.
- Have children sketch monuments and their emblems, create original art using cemetery motifs, or design a new monument.
- Purchase a book on cemetery symbolism or print out a glossary from the internet. (See "Resources.") Have the children explore the cemetery and look up the meanings of the symbols they find.

the cemetery and look up the meanings of the symbols they find.

- Pre-school aged children may enjoy "cleaning" stones with a plastic toothbrush and spray bottle or small plastic bucket of water. Never use metal handle or bristle brushes.

- Create a scavenger hunt by asking children to seek out common cemetery symbols, such as a lamb or a Masonic symbol. Older children can search for nonstandard spellings, clear evidence of our changing language.

- Use monuments as a math lesson and have children figure the ages of the deceased using the birth and death dates. If more than one child is involved a prize could be given to the first child who finds

someone who was the same age or had the same birthday as themselves.

Create temporary "rubblings" using aluminum foil and a wet sponge. (Charcoal, pencil or crayon rubbings can cause damage.)

DO educate children on the history and sacredness of the site, the meanings of symbols, how cemeteries differ today, etc.

DO NOT make rubbings of the stones. As gentle a process as this seems, it actually adds to the deterioration process.

DO NOT allow children to climb, sit or lean on monuments since many monuments are unstable and could cause serious injury.



*Mt. Olivet Cemetery*







## Identifying African-American Graves



Early African-American graves are often found in what appear to be marginal property—land which the planter wasn't likely to use for other purposes.

Sometimes, depressions can be found just outside the boundaries of white cemeteries. These may be the graves of slaves.

Graves were marked in a variety of ways. Sometimes unusual carved wooden staffs, thought perhaps to represent religious motifs or effigies, were used. Unfortunately, few of these remain. Some graves were marked using plants, such as cedars or yuccas.

Anthropologists have suggested this tradition may reflect an African belief in the living spirit. This tradition can be traced

as far as Haiti, and, probably mixing Christian religion with African beliefs, symbolizes that, "trees live after, death is not the end." Yuccas and other "prickly" plants may also have been used to "keep the spirits" in the cemetery. Other graves were marked with pieces of iron pipe, railroad iron, or any available object.

Possibly the most commonly known African-American grave marking practice was the use of "offerings" on top of the grave. Offerings included pottery, clocks, salt-and-pepper shakers, medicine bottles, spoons, pitchers, oyster shells, conch shells, white pebbles, toys, dolls' heads, bric-a-brac statues, light bulbs, tureens, flashlights, soap

dishes, false teeth, syrup jugs, spectacles, cigar boxes, piggy banks, gun locks, razors, knives, tomato cans, flower pots, marbles, bits of plaster and toilet tanks.

The graves of black Civil War soldiers can be identified by the following abbreviations: "C. Inf." for Colored Infantry, "Col" or "Col'd" for Colored, "USCC" for U.S. Colored Cavalry, "USCHA" for U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, "USCI" for U.S. Colored Infantry and "USCT" for Colored Troops.



## Monument Materials

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**Limestone:** sedimentary rocks that are made from the mineral calcite which came from the beds of evaporated seas and lakes and from sea animal shells. It is gray or white and on close inspection can appear to be made up of tiny pieces, but they do not sparkle like marble.

**Marble:** crystalline metamorphosed limestone. When pure it is white but may have many colors. Yellows with age. Look for veins or sparkling in direct sunlight.

**Granite:** igneous rock with visible grains, primarily quartz or feldspar. Very hard. Grays and pinks. Usually has a highly polished surface and is more commonly found on late twentieth-century monuments.

**Sandstone or Brownstone:** sedimentary rock composed of cemented sand grains. Reds and browns. Rare in Davidson County. Most prevalent in OH and PA.

**Slate:** metamorphosed shale; hard and brittle; very fine grained. Usually black or gray. Rare in Davidson County. Most prevalent in New England.

**Soapstone:** soft gray or black rock, primarily talc or magnesium silicate, pearly to greasy. Scratches easily with finger nail.

**Wood:** May be carved, painted or plain. Most prevalent in African-American cemeteries.

**Glass:** Sometimes, reversed painted.

**Metal:** Wrought iron, cast iron and zinc were popular metals for monuments. Iron is usually painted black and zinc is white. Zinc can be identified by listening for a hollow sound when tapped or if it is in relatively good shape while everything else around it is deteriorating. Zinc is also known as “white bronze” and was most prevalently used between the mid-1870s to WWII. Some more recent flush-to-ground or plaque markers are of bronze.



Limestone



Marble



Granite



Sandstone



Slate



Wood



Metal





## Monument Forms



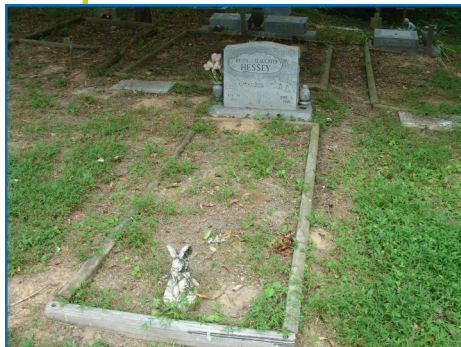
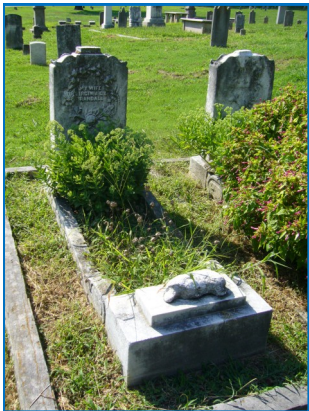
**Die-in-Socket:** With a Die-in-Socket the tablet has a tab that fits into a socket in the base. The image on the right shows a base missing the tablet allowing a view of the socket. (Images from Nashville City Cemetery.)



Die in Base



**Die-in-Base:** With a Die-in-Base there are interior rods that connect the two pieces. The difference between a Die-in-Socket and Die-in-Base isn't always evident without taking the pieces apart. A **Base, Die & Cap** is similar to a Die-in-Base but has three or more pieces: base, die and cap. The base is often stepped. The base or cap may be engraved with the family name.



**Bedstead monument:** Also called a "cradle bed." A headstone, footstone and side rails are laid to imitate the form of a bed. Generally the side rails are stone or concrete coping with vegetation planted "on" the bed. This type of monument reflects the Victorian era social and religious belief that the deceased is "sleeping." (Images from Nashville City Cemetery and cemetery on Hoggetts Ford Road.)

Cemetery and cemetery on Hoggetts Ford Road.)



**Burial Vault Slab:** This is a concrete burial vault left at grade with the top forming an imitation ledger. Often has name and funeral home plaques. Frequently found in African-American cemeteries in the south.





## Monument Forms

**Box tomb:** In a box tomb it might appear that the box itself is grave but the burial is actually below ground. A box tomb reflects a high status because it is essentially a raised ledger. (Image from Nashville City Cemetery.)



**Fieldstones:** These are rough looking stones that were usually placed at the head of the grave; sometimes also placed at the foot. On rare occasions, these stones may have initials carved into them. (Image from cemetery on Hoggetts Ford Road.)



**Footstone:** Small marker at foot of grave. Sometimes with initials; often has a design that matches the design of the head stone.







## Monument Forms



**Government Issued:** Civil War government issued monuments have a shield and general government issued are typically simple headstones (see below) with one of 26 different images at the top representing different types of religion. These are prevalent after WWII. The most common is a simple cross within a circle. (Image from Nashville City Cemetery.)



**Headstone:** Upright slab without a base, cap, or three-dimensional art. (Image on left from cemetery on Queen Avenue. Image on right shows that the tablet type monuments are installed without a base.)



**Lawn type:** Typically granite or bronze with top set flush with ground. Similar to raised top inscription markers.





## Monument Forms

**Ledger:** Typically about 4" thick. This type of monument provides lots of room for imagery and verse but is often difficult to read because of its exposure to the elements. (Images from Nashville City Cemetery.)



**Obelisk:** Four-sided column or shaft set on base, terminating in pyramidal point. Most common from 1880 to 1910. (Images from Nashville City Cemetery and Mt. Olivet Cemetery.)



**Pedestal:** Variation of an obelisk but terminates with an urn or other decorative element at the top. (Images from Nashville City Cemetery.)





## Monument Forms



**Plaque:** Simple rectangular or square tablets set at 45 degree angle. Inscription often in recessed frame. (Image from Nashville City Cemetery.)



**Pulpit Markers:** Height is usually less than 30". The monument has an inscription on top or side and will typically have a book (bible) or scroll on top. Often there will be an inscription in the book.



**Table tomb:** Ledger set on 4 to 6 feet. This monument looks similar to a box tomb but with four to six legs rather than enclosed sides. (Images from Nashville City Cemetery. (Image from Nashville City Cemetery.)



**Vault or Gravehouse:** A container into which one or more caskets or urns are placed. (Images from Nashville City Cemetery.)





## Tricks for Reading Hard to See Inscriptions

**NEVER** use any chemicals--household or otherwise--to clean stones. Many of the products that are commonly used, such as bleach, shaving cream and household cleaners, are very harmful to old stone.

**NEVER** use metal to brush or scrape a stone. If necessary, use a soft bristle brush.

**Using water:** Spray water on the first or top line, working one line at a time, using as little water as possible. The goal is to create contrast between the surface of the stone and the inscription. Do not use a large amount of water because dirt in the letters and number can be helpful. Light brushing may be useful in revealing the words. Brush lightly from left to right or right to left—not up and down. Use a soft bristled brush.

**Angles and Light:** Try reading from different angles. Use a flashlight to shine light on one side of the inscription. Use a hand mirror to catch sunlight and direct it on the monument. Visit the cemetery at different times of the day.

**Photography:** Pay attention to the sun. Photos will turn out best if the sun is above at a slight angle or behind you. If the sun is causing sunspots in the viewfinder, try shielding the top of the lens with your hand. A mirror can be used to reflect sun onto a shaded stone; however, lighting the complete stone will require a mirror the same height as the stone. A lightweight door mirror works well.

Whenever possible, focus your lens on the center of the object, within the film plane, parallel to the object. This will help prevent convergence or “key stoning.”





## Resources for Cleaning, Repair & Study



### REPAIR & STUDY

**Chicora Foundation Inc.**, [www.chicora.org](http://www.chicora.org) provides free articles on maintenance and repair as well as the ability to purchase inexpensive publications on topics such as African-American cemeteries and iconography.

**National Preservation Institute**, [www.npi.org](http://www.npi.org) provides seminars on preservation and documentation of historic cemeteries.

**The Association of Gravestone Studies**, [www.gravestonestudies.org/welcome.htm](http://www.gravestonestudies.org/welcome.htm), provides information on preservation and conservation of gravestones, including a slide show illustrating step-by-step instructions on how to reset a fallen stone.



### RESEARCH & DOCUMENTATION

**Metropolitan Government Archives**, [www.nashville.gov/metro\\_archives/](http://www.nashville.gov/metro_archives/)

State of Tennessee's Division of Archaeology, [www.tn.gov/environment/arch/](http://www.tn.gov/environment/arch/)

**Tennessee Genealogical Society**, [www.tngs.org](http://www.tngs.org)

**National Register of Historic Places**, [www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb41/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb41/)

**Saving Graves**, [www.savinggraves.net](http://www.savinggraves.net)

*A Graveyard Preservation Primer* by Lynette Strangstad

**Tennessee Historical Commission**: [www.tennessee.gov/environment/hist/](http://www.tennessee.gov/environment/hist/)

**Davidson County Cemetery Survey**:  
[www.davidsoncountycemeterysurvey.com](http://www.davidsoncountycemeterysurvey.com)

Some Websites for the meaning of **grave symbols**:

<http://www.alsirat.com/symbols/index.html>

<http://www.ghostwatchers.org/cemeteryart.html>





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*The Metropolitan Historical Commission (MHC), is a municipal historic preservation agency working to document history, save and reuse buildings, and make the public more aware of the necessity and advantages of preservation in Nashville and Davidson County, Tennessee. Created in 1966, the commission consists of fifteen citizen members appointed by the mayor and confirmed by Metro Council.*

*Our sister organization, the Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission (MHZC) reviews applications to create new historic overlay districts and reviews preservation permit applications for historic preservation and neighborhood conservation zoning overlays and landmark sites for new construction, alterations, additions, repair and demolition.*

**Guiding the Future by  
Preserving the Past.**

Metropolitan Historical  
Commission

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WE'RE ON THE WEB!

[WWW.NASHVILLE.GOV/MHC](http://WWW.NASHVILLE.GOV/MHC)

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